Saskatchewan
Education

Hon. Lorne H. Hepworth
Minister

A Brief by the Minister of Education: "The Year Ahead"

Delivered to:

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation
The Saskatchewan School Trustees Association
The League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September of this year, all schools in Saskatchewan will begin to introduce a new, province-wide curriculum. In this brief, the Minister of Education provides some guiding principles for the task ahead.

Guiding Principles

* The new curriculum should reinforce the provision of a broad, general education based on essential knowledge and skills which all students must possess.

* On-going public consultation is needed in setting education priorities.

* A major professional development program is needed to assist teachers in preparing for the new Curriculum.

* Teachers and parents must know **how much** children are expected to learn, particularly in key areas such as literacy and numeracy.

* Student assessment procedures must be made fair and objective, and should be designed to assist students, teachers, and parents.

* Teachers and parents must know **when** in the course of study children are expected to develop certain levels of knowledge and skills.

* Special assistance must be provided in school and in the home to children with learning difficulties.

* A better match is needed between various government and community services to keep children in school, and to keep drugs, hunger and abuse out.

* A joint working group is needed to assist school boards to continue to improve efficiency and hold down mill rates.

* Links between the school system and post-secondary education must be strengthened to realize the goal of life-long learning.

Introduction

In September of this year, all schools in Saskatchewan will begin to introduce a new province-wide curriculum. While the process will take some years to complete, the ultimate effects will be far-reaching.

As educators across the province prepare for the new curriculum, the Minister of Education wishes to provide a brief to the major participants. The purpose of the brief is to offer some guiding principles for the task ahead.

Background

Our government is absolutely committed to seeing that our children receive an education that ranks with the best anywhere in the world. The commitment of the government to ensuring continuation of first-rate education in Saskatchewan is unshakable.

A challenge of this magnitude requires the co-operation of everyone involved in education - teachers, parents, students, administrators, trustees, government and the community at large. We can only succeed by employing all of the skills and means at our disposal. This means sharing resources, talents, and ideas. If we all offer what we can, and work together, our children and our grandchildren will benefit from our efforts.

This spirit of co-operation has been a tradition in education in Saskatchewan for many years. Between 1981 and 1984, educators from across the province participated in a joint review of Kindergarten to Grade 12 education. This project culminated in the Directions Report, which established goals for public education into the 21st Century.

The motivating force behind the Directions project was the realization that a period of substantial change lies ahead for the school system. Powerful forces are driving this agenda for change.

First, there is the emergence of a new global economy in which knowledge and information are the dominant factors. Increasingly, societies with highly-skilled workforces who can adapt to new situations will enjoy the advantage. The premium will be on individuals who can think and communicate clearly, and who possess a firm base of knowledge.

The second force behind change has been a dramatic increase in the number of children who stay in school until age 18. Thirty years ago, less than 50% of children remained until Grade 12: today the figure is almost 80%. This has led to a major change in the composition of the student body in later grades.

The third factor is demographic in nature. As the Baby Boom ages, the number of adults with children in school is declining. In the next 20 years, the average citizen will neither be of school age nor have children of school age. This must be of concern to educators as well as to the public. For while education will become more important than ever, there is a potential for public interest to be diverted elsewhere, to issues such as health care and pensions. Maintaining public confidence and support for education will be a major consideration over the next 25 years.

The Year Ahead: A New Curriculum for Saskatchewan Schools

While this brief is concerned mainly with the implementation of the Core Curriculum, many other recommendations from Directions have already been implemented. These include:

* A pilot project to strengthen school-based decision-making. The School Improvement Project assists schools to introduce more effective management and to strengthen liaison with parents and the community.

* A school library policy aimed at improving library and resource facilities in schools across the province.

* Development of Indian/Native curriculum and materials.

* Establishment of educational research and development units at both universities and with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation.

These, and many other initiatives, have been implemented on a co-operative basis, with support and involvement from all of the participants in our school system.

With the experience of these initiatives to build on, we are now about to embark on the most far-reaching of the Directions recommendations - the implementation of a Core Curriculum. This project will have a profound effect on the school system in our province. The new Core Curriculum will play a major role in shaping the future of education in our province for many years to come.

Curriculum and Instruction

The most fundamental questions in designing a new curriculum are:

* **What** should our children learn?
* **How much** should they know?
* **When** should they learn it?

1) What Should our Children Learn?

As every teacher and parent knows, school today is a more complex place than it was 30 years ago. To the traditional subjects have been added a wide range of new topics, from consumer information and health, to driver education and the environment. Moreover, as society becomes more complex, the pressure to add even more material to the curriculum is increasing. Potentially, this process must sooner or later lead to a situation in which insufficient time remains for essential subjects.

The solution adopted by Directions is to define a core body of subject matter which all children must study. 80% of a student's time in the new curriculum will be devoted to these required areas of study. The remaining 20% of time may be used for locally-developed options.

The decision to implement a province-wide program of study responds to a strong public consensus that there is a common body of knowledge which all students should possess. The subject areas most widely identified as critical both by parents and the general public are:

* English [French in French-speaking schools]
* Mathematics
* Science
* Canadian Studies, History and Geography
* Computer Education
* Art and Literature
* Career Education
* Health and Fitness

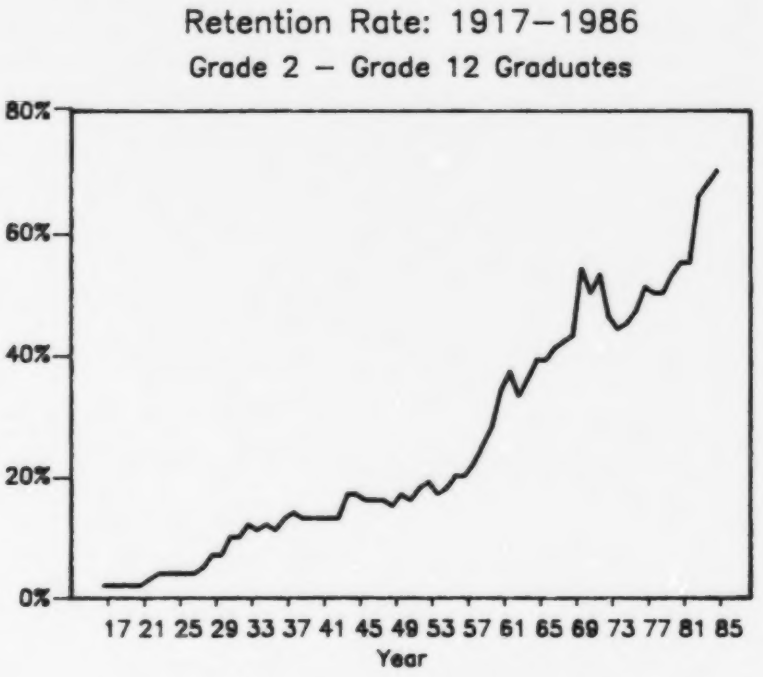
In addition to providing children with a common body of knowledge and information, the Core Curriculum also encourages children to think for themselves and to solve problems on their own. It introduces students to some of the new technology they must deal with in the workplace, and also stresses social and community values.

Conclusion

The new Core Curriculum must provide the foundation for a broad, general education. This includes a strong command of language, both written and spoken, the fundamentals of math and science, a knowledge of the history and geography of our country and its place in the world, and the ability to think critically and independently.

2) **How Much** Should Children Know?

Thirty years ago, less than 50% of children remained in school until Grade 12. Today, the figure is almost 80%. This represents one of the great success stories of public education.



However, one of the consequences has been that teachers today must cope with a student population with widely varying interests and abilities. This has raised the question of whether it is reasonable to expect all children to reach the same level of achievement.

It is important to respond to this question in a way that meets the aspirations of all students in the school system. It is also important to respond in a manner which ensures that all children acquire an acceptable level of knowledge and skills.

A two-part approach appears best suited to this issue. First, there is a strong public expectation that in the core subject areas, we will say with greater precision **how much** children are expected to learn. Proficiency levels must be set out in a manner that provides guidance for both teachers and students. As many students as possible should attain these levels. In some areas, particularly literacy and numeracy, there may be a need to raise proficiency levels beyond the present standard.

Second, while it is important that as many students as possible attain these proficiency levels, some students may encounter difficulty. For students with special needs, additional assistance must be provided. This should take the form of special support programs in the classroom, and also involvement by parents in the home.

Conclusion

We must be able to tell teachers and parents how much children are expected to learn in the core subject areas. In some cases, particularly literacy and numeracy, the standards of proficiency should be higher than at present. Special assistance must be provided to children in need, both in the classroom and at home.

3) **When** Should Children Learn?

Just as the curriculum has been modified over the last 20 years to accommodate a wider range of student abilities, so the techniques of teaching have also evolved. Present techniques pay relatively more attention to the process of learning, and relatively less to the content of what is learned. Less emphasis is placed on step by step acquisition of knowledge, and more is placed on the all-round development of the child as an individual.

The emphasis on a child-centred approach is clearly an improvement on earlier techniques which tended to focus on memorization and learning by recital. New teaching techniques are also designed to develop critical thinking and independent learning, which earlier techniques neglected.

However, an over-emphasis on process rather than content also has its dangers. Among these is the potential for children to progress through successive grades without ever fully mastering the knowledge and skills they should be learning at each stage.

While all parents want their children to be treated as individuals, they also want to know what their child should be learning at each stage, and whether he or she has learned it. They want to know what steps they can take, and what steps the school is going to take, if their child is falling behind.

Conclusion

It is important that the Core Curriculum define a step by step sequence for what is to be taught and what is to be learned. The scope and sequence of the curriculum must spell out appropriate knowledge and skill levels to be attained at each grade. And it must provide for remedial measures to assist children who experience difficulties.

Evaluation and Accountability

The government has set up an interagency committee to review student, teacher and program evaluation, and on-going monitoring of educational effectiveness. The Committee will develop principles for evaluation policies and a framework for the roles and responsibilities of teachers, schools, local boards and the department of education.

From the government's perspective, the following considerations are important.

* The Core Curriculum is the most significant attempt in the history of Saskatchewan education to improve student learning and educational programs. As Core is implemented, we must know if it is achieving intended outcomes and whether modifications are needed.

* Parents want to know how their children are faring in some meaningful and objective sense. They don't want their children to be penalized, but they do want a fair and reliable assessment of their child's strengths and weaknesses. If their child has special abilities or special needs, they want to know about it.

* Evaluation is a fundamental aspect of the learning process and student achievement. Teachers need effective practices to diagnose students' needs, to develop instructional strategies, to assess on-going progress and to communicate with students and parents.

* There is a growing public expectation that all government-funded programs will be able to demonstrate their effectiveness. As social and economic pressures increase, educators are coming under more pressure to address the issue of accountability.

Teachers have legitimate concerns about evaluation and its impact on their profession. By the same token, parents have a legitimate expectation for an objective and reliable assessment procedure.

Clearly, an evaluation process should neither be an end in itself, or a means of penalizing either teachers or students. Any evaluation procedure which might be implemented must be fair, objective, and designed to assist teachers and students.

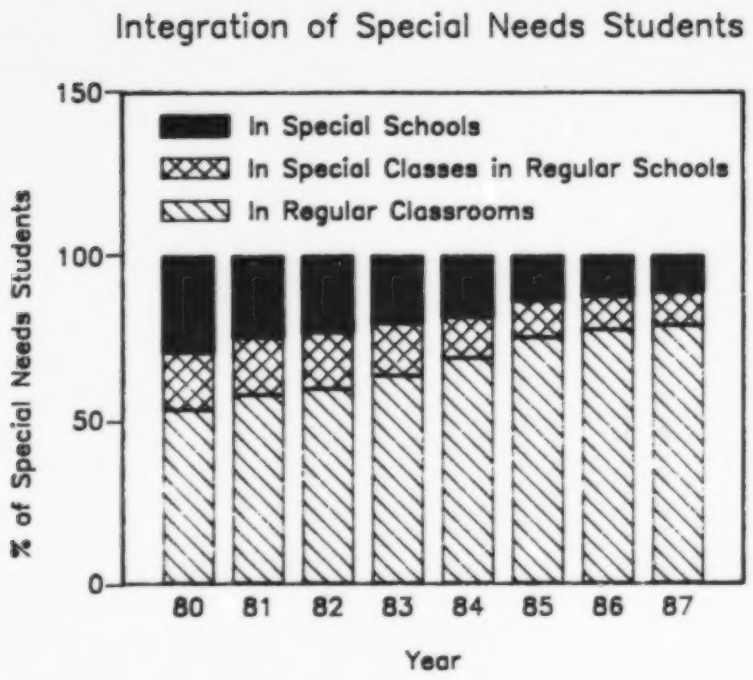
Conclusion

Keeping in mind the interest and concerns of all, we must explore the complex question of designing evaluation procedures. An open-minded approach to this issue is fundamental if we are to enjoy continued public confidence in our education system. The consultative process to examine this issue is already in place.

Social Change and the Classroom

Social change has had a profound impact on schools and on the conditions which teachers must deal with. As noted earlier, the government recognizes that teachers are being called upon to meet a far greater range of different student needs that ever before. Change in the student population is due to several factors:

* Society expects that children with disabilities will be integrated into regular classrooms and schools to the greatest extent possible. As a result, teachers have become the deliverers of many special education services.



* More children are staying in school and hoping to graduate from Grade 12. While all educators would agree that further reductions in the drop-out rate are needed, the trend has meant that teachers are encountering greater diversity in student abilities and interests.

* Children come from an increasing diversity of family circumstances where parents have widely different needs and expectations. For teachers this trend means dealing with the support needs of children from families who are "just coping" to the demands of other parents who expect very high levels of service from schools.

* Ethnic and racial diversity is rising within the school population. As noted in Directions, children of native ancestry are a particularly significant group in Saskatchewan with unique needs and aspirations. The educational needs of children in the North also require special attention.

These and other issues have raised some fundamental questions about the responsibilities of schools in relation to parents and society.

In the coming months, we wish to discuss with educators and other interested parties the following issues:

* Are children with special needs being adequately served by existing programs? Additional money has been allocated in the Special Education budget to explore this issue.

* What are the implications of Core Curriculum for children with special needs?

* What are the implications of Core Curriculum for rural schools? Flexibility must be provided to enable smaller schools to cope with the new curriculum.

* How can government, community agencies and educators combine forces to keep troubled young people in school, and prevent drugs, hunger, neglect and related emotional problems from inhibiting student achievement?

* Although overall class sizes have been falling in Saskatchewan since the early 1970's, there is upward pressure in some locations, particularly in large cities. An upper limit on class sizes is urgently needed to halt this upward drift. This must be resolved through consultation between the various parts of the school system and the department.

* There is concern over drop-out rates in northern Saskatchewan. The government is committed to finding a solution to this long-standing problem. A Task Force has been set up to propose new approaches to education in the North.

Conclusion

The most urgent priority is to keep children in school while dealing with social pressures which may pull in the opposite direction. The Ministers of Education, Health and Social Services will work jointly to find a better match between government and community services and the needs of troubled young people.

Professional Development

Implementation of the Core Curriculum will impose significant demands on teachers, principals and administrators. The most immediate need is for an inservice training program to prepare for the new Curriculum. Funding has been provided in the department's Curriculum and Instruction budget to support this initiative. Consultations are under way to design the program, which will require the support of all participants in the school system.

Beyond the immediate need for inservice related to Core, a number of other issues merit further discussion. These include:

* Teachers have limited opportunities to move upward on a professional basis. They must move into administrative positions to advance. Is there a need for alternative career paths that recognize highly qualified and effective teachers?

* Professional development for teachers is a major pressure in schools. There is an increasing need for co-ordinated and effective inservice strategies in light of concerns about time away from the classroom.

* The under-representation of women in management and of natives at all levels is intolerable. The government believes that special measures should be implemented immediately at all levels to improve representation of these groups. By way of example, the department is committed to employment equity in its internal hiring. Fifty percent of senior management in the department are now women.

* In a period of change, the role of the principal is critical as a leader, manager and problem solver. The Directions report identified the need for further discussion on this critical role.

* Further to the concern that content is being under-emphasized in present teaching techniques, we wish to consult both Colleges of Education. There may be a need to include more course work in subject matter in the professional education of teachers.

Conclusion

Directions cannot be implemented successfully without the full participation of the teaching profession. We are interested in discussing professional development issues with all parties in order to ensure that the best interests of teachers are protected and enhanced.

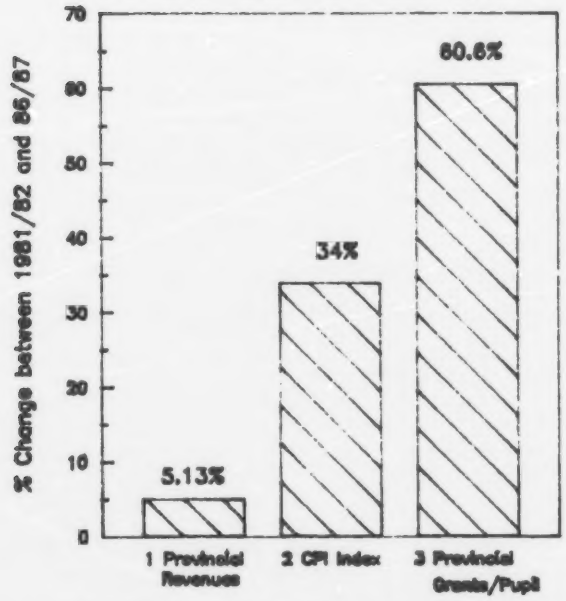
Financial Management

The government recognizes the critical importance of education to the social, intellectual and economic life of the province and its citizens. This importance has been demonstrated since the government took office, both in terms of resource commitments and policy initiatives.

In the past few years Saskatchewan has experienced difficult economic and financial circumstances. All government departments and groups in our society have had to make sacrifices in response to these conditions. Nevertheless, the government has given continued priority to resource commitments for education:

* Provincial grants per student to local boards increased by 60% from 1981 to 1987. The inflation rate was 34% over the same period, while government revenues rose by only 5%. Thus in effect, spending on education increased by 26.6% in real terms, while over the same period, government revenues actually declined by 28.9% relative to inflation.

Comparison of Provincial Revenues, CPI Index and Provincial Grants per Pupil 1981/82 and 1986/87



1. Provincial Revenues=Actual Combined Funds Revenue
2. Consumer Price Index for the Years 1981 and 1987
3. Provincial Grants Paid to School Divisions (Annual Report Statistics)

* The Education Development Fund committed $150 million to a wide range of new initiatives. Over 2000 projects at the local level have been approved to date.

This commitment to education continues in the 1988-89 budget. Funds for education have been significantly increased.

Despite this real effort by government to maintain support levels in difficult times, the need for effective management of expenditures is more important than ever. While the provincial government contributes half of the cost of running the school system, much of the decision-making is carried out at the local level.

It is therefore vital that local Boards of Education maintain efforts to maximize efficiency.

There is strong support for this view on the part of all trustees and Boards. At the same time, a survey of Board expenditures shows a huge variance in the level of administrative and management costs. These can include everything from the number of support staff, to architect fees and purchasing policies. Some variance is to be expected, due to differing local priorities and economies of scale. However the actual variance, which is in excess of several hundred percent, appears greater than might reasonably be expected.

Conclusion

We wish to set up a joint working group to help school boards in achieving maximum possible administrative efficiency.

Public Involvement in Decision Making

The key tc successful implementation of changes in education is effective public involvement in decision-making. Priorities in education cannot be determined by government alone. Ongoing consultation with the public is required both at the departmental and at the local level.

At the departmental level, the Minister of Education will be seeking advice from all interested parties including parents, educators, community groups, business and labour, in the months to come.

At the local level, trustees have already noted the fact that too often, school board elections go uncontested. More must be done to encourage greater public involvement in local decision-making.

We wish to pursue with trustees, teachers and administrators, methods of encouraging greater public involvement and understanding. Options include expanding the range of information which Boards provide to the public.

Conclusion

More effort is required by all of us to encourage greater public involvement and understanding of education issues. Measures which can be undertaken jointly are of particular interest.

Improved Links between Schools and Post-Secondary Education

One of the common goals of all educators is to advance the ideal of life-long learning. This can only be accomplished if the links between the school system and post-secondary education are strengthened. This was one of the major objectives in the decision to combine the Department of Education with the Department of Advanced Education and Manpower.

At present, a number of obstacles lie in the path of efforts to strengthen the links between schools and post-secondary education.

* There is no common agreement on high school graduation standards or post-secondary entrance requirements. Grade 12 graduation standards vary from school to school, as do entrance requirements in the various faculties on both campuses.

* There is currently no firm policy for the sharing of facilities between, for example, schools and regional colleges. A common policy would greatly assist colleges and schools in making fuller use of available facilities.

* Residents of the province can presently acquire a Grade 12 certificate by three separate routes:

  - A high school Grade 12 diploma
  - An Adult Basic Education [ABE] Grade 12 certificate, administered by Regional Colleges
  - A General Educational Development [GED] Grade 12 certificate, administered by the Department of Education

While all three qualifications are intended to be equivalent, this is not universally understood or accepted. Further work is required to resolve this problem.

* The decision to mainstream children with special needs into school classrooms led to the development of extensive special programs in the school system. The availability of comparable assistance is much lower in post-secondary institutions. This leads to difficulties for special needs students who wish to continue their education beyond Grade 12.

In most of these instances, the main problem has been one of communication rather than resources. The goal of lifelong learning requires all of us, as educators, to work to remove these difficulties.

Conclusion

Our government wishes to work with all parties involved to strengthen the links between the school system and post-secondary education.

Summary

Our government is optimistic that the issues which have been raised in this brief will be resolved through the collective will and expertise of educators in Saskatchewan. Different points of view are inevitable and should be welcomed if we are to arrive at solutions which are acceptable to educators and the public. We look forward to discussing this brief with all of the parties and with the general public in the months ahead.